

Prineville District Office, Prineville, Oregon
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Oak Canyon Riparian Pasture Fence
EA. #OR-056-02-004
Project # 73-7233

I. Need for the Action

Grazing management of public land in Oak Canyon Allotment has historically been conducted in conjunction with adjacent private land use. Allotment ownership is 54% private and 46% BLM. The majority of acreage adjacent to Oakbrook is private. However, the lower 1/4 mile of Oakbrook and its confluence with the Deschutes River are public. A fence adjacent to the railroad tracks at the mouth of Oak Canyon has precluded grazing along the river for approximately 100 years. However, inconsistent maintenance has periodically allowed cattle access to river banks. Grazing in Oakbrook historically occurred between March and August. In 1994, a fence was built to create a riparian pasture of Oakbrook and surrounding uplands. Subsequently, riparian pasture grazing was restricted to winter or early spring and cattle removed prior to May 1. The riparian pasture fence relied heavily on topographical barriers to keep cattle from accessing the creek and been marginally effective. The grazing permittee asked the BLM to construct a fence so he could comply with Endangered Species Act requirements and still graze his private land. The proposal would augment existing fence to preclude livestock access to Oakbrook. The project would be located in Township 3 South, Range 15 East, Sections 7 and 8.

II. Proposed Action and Alternative

1. Proposed Action

Additional fencing to exclose public land in Oakbrook to grazing would involve construction of approximately one mile of fence crossing Oakbrook near the north public/private land boundary, and following slopes on the east side of Oak Canyon. Additionally, approximately 1/4 mile of fencing would be constructed on the west side of Oak Canyon and tied into topography to restrict livestock access from adjacent ridgetops.

Fence construction would use four strands of barbed wire with metal posts and braces. Metal posts and prefabricated metal braces would reduce risk of fence destruction in wildfire. Top and bottom wire heights would be 38 and 18 inches, respectively, with post spacing at approximately 16 ½ feet. In areas of solid rock, a motorized drill would be used for drilling post holes. A wooden panel structure that hinges off a cable would be constructed in the stream bottom. This structure would prevent damage during high flow events due to the structures flexibility. Due to difficult project area access, fence materials would be transported by helicopter. Fence builder access would be by boat or all terrain vehicle (ATV). All scrap fence materials would be removed from the site and disposed of properly.

Livestock grazing of this creek segment would continue as an option, but comply with the Lower Deschutes River Management Plan (LDRMP), if authorized.

The proposed action would be in compliance with the Lower Deschutes River Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (1993), Two Rivers Resource Management Plan, Record of Decision, and Rangeland Program Summary (1986), PACFISH Environmental Assessment (1994) and the Oak Canyon Allotment Evaluation (1996). The LDRMP pages 31 & 32, states restoration goals in riparian areas are to maintain 51-75% of plant composition of natural plant communities (late seral or good ecological condition). A number of management actions can be employed to accomplish vegetative goals and fencing falls into this category. The Two Rivers Resource Management Plan, pages 37 & 63, states fencing riparian areas to protect vegetation diversity also enhances wildlife diversity.

2. No Action

Additional fence construction would not occur. Cattle would continue to drift into the riparian pasture from uplands.

III. Description of the Existing Environment

Soil types located within the project area are Lickskillet, extremely stoney loam 40-70% slope with a south-facing exposure, Wrentham, rock outcrop complex 35-70% slope and north-facing exposure. Due to steep slopes, run off potential is rapid, and erosion potential high. Climax plant communities of these soil types are dominated by native bunch grass including Idaho fescue and bluebunch wheatgrass. Current vegetative condition is generally poor due to historical, season long livestock grazing. Uplands are dominated by cheatgrass, medusahead rye and weedy annual forbs.

Riparian pasture and grazing management changes in 1994 improved riparian area condition slightly. However, periodic cattle access to the creek during summer has slowed improvement. Many small mock orange and alder have sprouted, yet receive moderate browse by cattle, or big game. Canyon bottom vegetation is dominated by cheatgrass on floodplains and early seral herbaceous riparian vegetation along the creek. Creek overstory is dominated by large white oak trees, with a lower canopy of young alder and mock orange. In normal moisture regimes, water flow in Oakbrook is perennial within the lower 1/4 mile of stream, and intermittent up canyon.

The Oak Canyon area provides summer and winter range for approximately 250 mule deer. Other wildlife species include chukar, valley quail, mourning dove, bighorn sheep, elk, cougar, bobcat, rattlesnake and various songbirds. Oak trees in the canyon appear to attract specific species (Lewis's woodpecker, red shafted flicker, porcupine) in greater densities than other river locations.

In October 1988 the U.S. Congress designated the 100-mile segment from Pelton Reregulating

Dam to the confluence with Columbia River as a National Wild and Scenic River and classified as a recreational river area. The proposed project lies within the Lower Deschutes River Wild and Scenic River boundary.

IV. Impacts

A. Soils and Riparian Vegetation

1. Proposed Action

Soil compaction would occur where livestock trail along portions of the fence. Following construction, riparian vegetation would be expected to increase as livestock use was restricted. Increased species diversity and structure of riparian vegetation would improve stream bank stability, stream shade, and water quality. Long term effects would include improved riparian condition resulting from additional grazing restrictions. The fence would cross the floodplain, but no direct alteration to the floodplain would occur.

2. No Action

No action would result in continuation of current livestock drift patterns and riparian area grazing outside authorized seasons. Continued summer grazing and browsing of riparian grasses and shrubs by cattle would retard vegetative improvement along Oakbrook.

B. Wildlife

1. Proposed Action

Construction of the fence would create an obstacle which big game would have to negotiate. This impact would be mitigated by fence specifications to ease passage (Two Rivers Resource Management Plan, Record of Decision, page 40, Appendix B, paragraph 2.) Specified wire heights would reduce chance of animals getting caught or injured in the fence. Improved riparian condition following fence construction would improve wildlife forage quality and increase vegetative cover.

2. No Action

Continued off season livestock use would limit improvement of wildlife habitat.

C. Visual

1. Proposed Action

Fence visual impacts would be partially mitigated by use of construction materials which would blend with surroundings (Two Rivers Resource Management Plan, Record of Decision, Appendix B, page 40, paragraph 1.). This mid-slope fence would not skyline and would cause less visual distraction. The fence would not be visible from the river. Improved riparian condition resulting from restricted livestock use would enhance visual appeal of Oak Canyon.

2. No Action

Degraded riparian vegetation would continue to dominate visuals.

D. Cultural Resources

1. Proposed Action

A cultural resource survey of the project area was completed in 2002 and no effect would occur to cultural materials or traditional cultural properties. Any human remains or cultural and/or paleontological resources discovered as a result of the undertaking would be reported by telephone to the authorized officer. All operations in the immediate area of such a discovery would be suspended until written notification to proceed is issued by the authorized officer. An evaluation of the discovery will be made by the authorized officer, in consultation with a qualified cultural resource specialist, to determine appropriate actions to prevent the loss of significant cultural or scientific values.

2. No Action

There would be no impact to Cultural Resources.

E. Special Status Species

Plants

1. Proposed Action

Two Special Status Plant species would be expected in the project area: *Lomatium farinosum* var. *hambleniae* and *Mimulus jungermannioides*.

Lomatium farinosum var. *hambleniae* (Hamblen's lomatium) is a small member of the carrot family endemic to Wasco Co. as well as parts of Washington. As a BLM Assessment Species, it is considered by the Natural Heritage Data Base to be threatened or endangered in Oregon but more common elsewhere. Specific known locations include land near Tygh Ridge and in the Criterion Ranch area where it prefers rocky slopes and scablands. In the project area, it would be expected on ridge tops and unlikely to be affected by project implementation.

Mimulus jungermannioides (hepatic monkeyflower), a member of the snapdragon family, is a Bureau Sensitive Species (formerly C2) endemic to seepage zones in steep-walled canyons and along basalt cliffs. In the Prineville District, it occurs sporadically in the Deschutes and John Day River drainages, with known locations along the Deschutes River near Maupin and in Buck Hollow, and in the John Day drainage near Thirtymile Creek, Rock Creek and along the main stem John Day. There are also locations along the cliffs overlooking the Columbia River. Due to its inaccessible, protected habitat,

fence construction would have no effect.

Construction and use of the proposed fence would have negligible impact on the vegetation in the project area. In addition, the two species suspected in the project area, *Lomatium farinosum* var. *hambleniae* and *Mimulus jungermannioides*, would not be affected in any case. (Special Status Plant Survey Waiver, Report No.: 00001, October 14, 1999.)

2. No Action

This alternative would not impact Special Status plants.

Wildlife

1. Proposed Action

Special Status wildlife documented in the vicinity of the proposed project include the bald eagle, which winters in the Deschutes Canyon and California bighorn sheep. The proposed action would have no impact on the bald eagle but would add another fence that bighorn would have to negotiate.

2. No Action

There would be no impacts to special status wildlife.

Fisheries

1. Proposed Action

The following species of fish occur in Oakbrook or have potential to be affected by this project:

Redband trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) are a Bureau Sensitive Species and a State Species of Concern. Summer Steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Oak Canyon provides spawning and rearing habitat for redband trout and summer steelhead. The system is in poor condition for fish due to limited habitat diversity. Other fish species that have been observed in the creek are suckers, dace and sculpin.

Project implementation and subsequent improved riparian condition would benefit fisheries resources through increased habitat, and improved water quality and quantity.

2. No Action:

Improvement of fish habitat in Oakbrook may be slowed or possibly reversed due to lack of cattle control from upland and private pastures.

Wild and Scenic Rivers

1. Proposed Action

The location of the proposed fence will be situated near the external boundary of the Wild and

Scenic River corridor. It would have no impact on any of the rivers outstandingly remarkable values.

2. No Action

Fisheries and visual values could be impacted by unmanaged grazing riparian vegetation.

V. No Impact Items

The following items were considered, but will not be addressed because they either would not be affected or do not exist in the project area:

1. Wilderness
2. Prime or Unique Agricultural Lands
3. ACECs
4. Drinking Water Quality
5. Native American Religious Concerns
6. Hazardous Wastes
7. Air Quality
8. Recreation
9. Environmental Justice

VI. Mitigation

No mitigation, other than that specified in the above assessment, is required. Fence construction across the stream will not occur from March 1 to April 30 if steelhead are spawning in the general vicinity.

VII. Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impacts would include improvement of riparian and upland habitat within the fenced area. Regenerated riparian area would increase aesthetic values of the canyon and provide habitat for both terrestrial and aquatic species.

VIII. Consultation/Coordination

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/s/ JC Hanf
Environmental Coordinator/NEPA Compliance

10/25/02
Date